

# 5 Tips for Native Czech Speakers

Czech has been heavily influenced by German throughout its history and has adopted many German words. Although the two languages share many similarities, such as short and long vowels or *Auslautverhärtung* (pronunciation of *b d g* as *p t k* at the end of a word like *Ta[k]* ‘day’), there are several sounds and phenomena that can cause difficulties for Czech learners. We’re going to look at five of them and give you tips on how to improve your pronunciation in German!

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## Tip #1: Umlauts!

One of the biggest and most well-known challenges for Czech speakers are umlauts, which in German are written with the following letters: ü [y] as in *Stück* ‘piece’ or [y] as in *Brühe* ‘broth’, ö [œ] as in *Töchter* ‘daughters’ or [ø] as in *Söhne* ‘sons’, and finally ä [ɛ] as in *Hände* ‘hands’. The latter is not as difficult for Czechs as the pronunciation of ü and ö: many learners often replace them with [i] or [e]/[ɛ]. Although Czechs mostly know umlauts, they sometimes underestimate the importance of their correct pronunciation. If you don’t pronounce them well, you might say a nonsense word or mix up the meaning. For example, *Tür* ‘door’ incorrectly pronounced with something like *i* can be understood as *Tier* ‘animal’. Practice these sounds here [Link zu Übungen](#).

## Tip #2: Words ending in -er

Words ending in unstressed -er such as *Bäcker* ‘baker’, *Lehrer* ‘teacher’, *Hammer* ‘hammer’, *Teller* ‘plate’, *Männer* ‘men’, *Butter* ‘butter’ are not pronounced with *er* or even *r* at the end! It sounds strange, but the fact is that the last two letters are pronounced with something like *a*, more precisely with near-open central [e] (“Bäck[ə]”, “Lehr[ə]” etc.). So, forget the orthography and pronounce the words correctly ☺!

## Tip #3: The *ich*-sound

Czech has only one sound [x] for the letters *ch*, which are also found in German words like *Bach* ‘creek’ or *Buch* ‘book’ (the *ach*-sound). The *ich*-sound [ç] in words like *Milch* ‘milk’ or *ich* ‘I’ does not exist in Czech. We find it in many German words like *möchte* ‘(I’d like to’, *Mädchen* ‘girl’, *reiche* ‘rich’, *weich* ‘soft’ or *Honig* ‘honey’ too. How shall we pronounce [ç]? Imagine you want to articulate *j* like in *ja* ‘yes’ but you end up saying the German <ch>

sound instead. If it doesn't work, don't worry, you are not alone with this problem! We have devoted several lessons for this sound, see [Link zu Übungen](#).

#### **Tip #4: Aspiration of p t k**

One of the most typical features of many German varieties is aspiration of the consonants *p t k*. This means that the consonants are pronounced something like *p<sup>h</sup>*, *t<sup>h</sup>*, *k<sup>h</sup>* (e.g., *P<sup>h</sup>ark* ‘park’, *T<sup>h</sup>urm* ‘tower’, *K<sup>h</sup>atze* ‘cat’). Aspiration is not difficult, but keep it in mind! If you don't aspirate, German natives might understand *backen* ‘to bake’ instead of *packen* ‘to pack’, for instance. Actually, it happens to me all the time: when I don't aspirate my surname *Pešková* with *p<sup>h</sup>*, the Germans write it as *Bešková*. Remember that syllable-final (e.g., *ratlos* ‘helpless’) or word-final consonants (e.g., *Hut* ‘hat’) and consonants *p t k* after another consonant in the same syllable (e.g., *Sport* ‘sport’, *Skorpion* ‘scorpio’, *stark* ‘strong’) are never aspirated! You find some exercises here [Link zu Übungen](#)

#### **Tip #5: Close-mid e and o!**

The pronunciation of the vowels *o* and *e* is quite tricky to learn, but it will make your German perfect! First you need to realize that vowels are produced by moving the tongue up and down and front to back. The more you open your mouth, the more “open” vowels you get, such as [a]. The more you close your mouth, the more “close” vowels you produce like [i] or [u]. Unlike Czech, German has three different *e*-sounds: First, an open-mid vowel [ɛ] as in *Käse* ‘cheese’, *nett* ‘nice’ or *Bett* ‘bed’ (btw, this one is very close to the Czech *e!!!!*). Second, a mid-central vowel [ə] called *Schwa* (e.g., *Sonne* ‘sun’ or you use it, when you are hesitating “**eeeeeeeh**, I don't know!”). And third, a close-mid vowel [e] in words like *beten* ‘pray’, *Lehrer* ‘teacher’ or *Weg* ‘track’. To produce [e] well, you have to close your mouth a bit more than you are used to in Czech. In addition, German has two *o*-sounds: a close-mid vowel [o] like in *oder* ‘or’ and an open-mid vowel [ɔ] like in *voll* ‘full’. And remember that [o] is “closer” than the Czech *o*! Click [Link zu Übungen](#) for an exercise.

Are you missing something? You can also visit the blog (in English <https://sylby.com/blog/>) (in German <https://sylby.com/de/blog/>) and follow tips for other native speakers!

\*In this article we use IPA-symbols. These are the symbols that you also find in a dictionary and that indicate how a word is pronounced. If you want to know more about them please read our article [here](#) or visit the [International Phonetic Association](#).